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AUTHOR Wiseman, Richard L.; Davison, Mark L.
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ABSTRACT

A total of 79 college students participated in an investigation designed to clarify the function of conversational closings. Multidimensional scaling was used to derive a three-dimensional representation of the semantic meaning conveyed by 20 frequently used conversational closings. Regression analyses of the scaling solution suggested that the dimensions could be interpreted as reflecting the degree of inaccessibility, the degree of social distance between partners, and the degree of the support for the relationship signalled by the terminals. The results indicated that the semantic meaning of closing terminals would allow them to serve two functions: signalling inaccessibility and signalling support for the relationship. The obliqueness of the dimensions suggests that a terminal might simultaneously fulfill more than one function and that the functions are not independent. (Author/FL)

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The Semantic Meanings and Functions of Conversational Closings

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by

Richard L. Wiseman and Mark L. Davison

RICHARD L. WISEMAN, who received his Ph. D. at the University of Minnesota, is currently as Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at California State University, Fullerton, CA, 92634. His main interests include interpersonal and nonverbal communication.

MARK L. DAVISON, who received his Ph. D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social, Psychological, and Philosophical Foundations of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. His main research interests are in the areas of educational and psychological measurement, particularly multidimensional scaling.

Running head: Conversational Closings

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Abstract

Multidimensional scaling was used to derive a three-dimensional representation of the semantic meaning conveyed by twenty frequently used conversational closings. Regression analyses of the scaling solution suggest that the dimensions could be interpreted as reflecting a) the degree of inaccessibility, b) the degree of social distance between partners, and c) the degree of the support for the relationship signalled by the terminals. Results indicate that the semantic meaning of closing terminals would allow them to serve two functions outlined by Goffman and Knapp et al.: signalling inaccessibility and signalling support for the relationship. The obliqueness of the dimensions suggests that a terminal may simultaneously fulfill more than one function, such as signalling inaccessibility and a lack of support for the relationship, and that the functions are not independent.

The Semantic Meanings and Functions of Conversational Closings

In outlining the components of a conversation, Schegloff and Sacks listed three basic elements: an opening, one or more topics, and a closing.[1] For Schegloff and Sacks, the closing consists of a pre-closing, an optional topic, a terminal marker, and an optional misplacement marker. The terminal marker, the topic of our research, properly closes the conversation. It may take the form of Good-bye, See you soon, Thank you, etc. The present paper is intended to build on the works of Goffman and Knapp, Hart, Friedrich, and Schulman, which attempted to clarify the functions of conversational closings.[2]

Goffman considers conversational closings to be a subset of supportive interchanges, i.e., access rituals. Whereas conversational greetings mark a transition to a state of increased access, conversational closings mark a transition to a state of decreased access. More importantly, Goffman suggests that a ritual, e.g., a conversational closing, is "a perfunctory, conventionalized act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value to that object of ultimate value or to its stand-in."[3] Thus, the specific form of the leave-taking behavior will be dependent upon the nature of the interpersonal relationship. In fact, Goffman suggests that "rituals of greeting and farewell are responsive not merely to the issue of access but also to the kind of ritual license binding the performers."[4] Some of the salient features of the ritual license are the acquaintanceship of the

interactants, the differential status of the interactants, and the length of inaccessibility of future contact.

One of the first studies to test some of Goffman's ideas is one by Knapp et al.. Knapp et al. posit three functions of leave-taking: "(1) to warn of future inaccessibility, (2) to reinforce future encounters, and (3) to summarize the substantive portions of the interaction."[5] Furthermore, the authors hypothesize that leave-taking behaviors vary according to the relational constraints that bind the two communicators, specifically, acquaintanceship and status. To discern the verbal and nonverbal behaviors associated with leave-taking and to test the effect of relational constraints, Knapp et al. performed a content analysis on the last segment of interview sessions. Contrary to what might be expected, "very little variation in verbal and nonverbal behavior was perceived in leave-taking when partners were experimentally paired, even though some of these pairs were dissimilar with respect to status and acquaintanceship."[6] From this evidence, Knapp et al. concluded that "behavioral regularity attends leave-taking."[7]

It is possible that conversational closings can and do signal status differences and acquaintanceship, but that the content of the closings in the Knapp et al. study did not vary as a function of status or acquaintanceship either because the speakers acknowledged status and acquaintanceship in other parts of the conversation or because the authors' laboratory interview did not motivate speakers to acknowledge status and acquaintanceship. Content analysis of conversational closings in any fixed conversational setting would reflect communicators' usage of those closings

only in that particular context. Studying the terminals in isolation, rather than content analyzing actual conversations, has the advantage that it permits analysis of the closings free from such contextual effects. Consequently, the authors decided to study the semantic meaning of closings to determine whether their meanings would enable them to serve the functions described by Knapp et al. and by Goffman. That is, we decided to investigate whether closings are perceived as signalling inaccessibility, signalling support for the relationship, acknowledging status differences, and reflecting acquaintanceship. The summarizing function hypothesized by both Goffman and Knapp et al. was not included because we were not concerned with whole conversations.

Since the intent of the present study is to investigate the underlying semantic meanings of conversational closings, a data analytic tool is needed to discern individuals' perceptions of those closings. A technique frequently used to discern psychological dimensions of perception is multidimensional scaling (MDS).[8] Basically the task is threefold: first, the subjects judge the distance, i.e., the similarity/dissimilarity, of each and every pair of the stiumli under examination, in our case, the conversational closings. Second, the inter-stimuli distances are then analyzed to determine the number and nature of the psychological dimensions utilized in making distance judgments. Thirdly, each of the psychological dimensions extracted by MDS are then interpreted by the researcher. Because MDS satisfies the needs of the present study and has been utilized in several recent communication studies,[9] MDS will be employed in our study of conversational closings.

Method

Subjects

Twenty-four students at a midwestern university participated in the pilot study. Thirty-five students, twenty females and fifteen males, from two beginning speech courses volunteered to be in the main portion of the experiment. Subjects ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-six. To facilitate the interpretation of the dimensions, twenty additional subjects were asked to complete a six-item semantic differential-like scale.

Stimuli

A list of verbal terminals was developed by asking the pilot subjects to list verbal terminals that they had heard. Terminals listed by at least one subject were then rated for the frequency with which they were heard. Of the fifty terminals listed by one or more subjects, the twenty with the highest frequency ratings were selected for use in the main study. The twenty selected terminals were: Good-bye, Take it easy, Catch you later, See you soon, Talk to you later, So long, Have a nice day, I've got to go now, Don't get into any trouble, Nice to see you, Take care now, I want to be alone now, I'll get back to you, Hang in there, Let's get together sometime, Thanks for stopping by, and Why don't you call me sometime.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire used in the main experiment consisted of two parts. Part 1 asked judges to rate the similarity of all possible pairs of the stimuli, with ten repeated pairs serving as a reliability check. With the

exception of the ten repeated pairs which were the last items on the questionnaire, all the paired comparisons were randomized. An example of such a paired comparison is given below:

		Similar								Dissimilar
So long	Have a nice day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

The ten repeated pairs provided a test-retest reliability estimate of .85 for the similarity judgments. Part 2 of the questionnaire asked judges to rate each stimulus terminal on ten bipolar scales, each of which was associated with one of the four hypothesized terminal functions. Three of the ten bipolar scales, absolute-tentative, expedient-slow, and immediate-delayed, were chosen to reflect the inaccessibility signalled by each terminal. Three of the scales, pleasant-unpleasant, likable-repugnant, and kind-cruel, were chosen to reflect the support for the relationship signanled by each terminal. Three scales, important-trivial, strong-weak, and formal-informal, were selected to reflect differential status. The remaining scale, unique-common, was assumed to reflect acquaintanceship.

After the main experimental session, the authors concluded that additional bipolar ratings were needed to facilitate the interpretation of the dimensions. Consequently, twenty additional subjects were asked to rate each stimulus terminal on six more bipolar scales, each of which was associated with one of the four hypothesized terminal functions. One of the bipolar scales, signalling desire for future communication-signalling no desire for future communication, was chosen to reflect the inaccessibility signalled by each terminal. Another bipolar scale,

strengthening t[illegible]he relationship between communicators-hindering to the relationship between communicators, was assumed to reflect the support for the relationship signalled by each terminal. Another scale, typical of equal-unequal status communicators, was selected to reflect differential status. The three remaining scales, typical of acquainted-unacquainted communicators, typical of friends-strangers, and typical of established relationships-typical of unaccustomed communicators, were assumed to reflect acquaintanceship.

Underlying this research is the assumption that subjects would rate the similarity of terminal pairs by considering the similarity of those pairs along the major psychological dimensions of meaning conveyed by those terminals. The similarity judgment task has the advantage that it leaves subjects free to consider psychological dimensions of meaning that are salient to them rather than ones imposed by the experimenter. Consequently, the scale values of terminals derived from those similarity judgments should reflect what subjects perceive to be the major psychological dimensions of meaning conveyed by those terminals. If a hypothesized dimension of meaning is related to the dimensions actually used by subjects in making similarity judgments, then the ratings of terminals along the bipolar scales associated with that hypothesized dimension should be correlated with the terminal scale values derived from the MDS of the similarity judgments.

Results

The Stimulus Space

For each pair of terminals, similarity ratings were averaged across

subjects and the average similarity ratings were input into TORSCA, Young and Torgerson's nonmetric, multidimensional scaling program.[10] Solutions were obtained in one through nine dimensions. Figure 1 shows the fit measure, called Stress, for each of the nine solutions. The lower the Stress, the better the solution fits the data. The curve in Figure 1 levels off or forms an elbow at three and five dimensions, suggesting that either a three- or five-dimensional solution should be retained. Since neither the fourth or fifth dimension seemed interpretable the authors retained the smaller, three-dimensional solution shown in Table 1. The intercorrelations between these dimensions were somewhat high. Dimensions 1 and 2 correlated -.72, Dimensions 1 and 3 correlated -.57, and Dimensions 2 and 3 correlated .87.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here

To test the hypotheses about the interpretations of the three dimensions, the ratings of each stimulus on each of the sixteen bipolar scales were averaged across subjects. The average stimulus ratings on each bipolar scale were then correlated with the stimulus coordinates along each MDS dimension (see Table 2). Table 2 also reports the multiple correlations obtained by predicting each unidimensional scale from the set of MDS dimensions. The squares of these multiple correlations represent the maximum amount of variance in each bipolar scale which can be predicted by the TORSCA dimensions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Interpretation of the Dimensions

Dimension 1 was most highly correlated with the four bipolar scales associated with the inaccessibility hypothesis, desire-no desire for future communication (r = .66), absolute-tentative (r = -.86), expedient-slow (r = -.89), and immediate-delayed (r = -.91). For each of these four scales, nearly all of the variance accounted for by the three TORSCA dimensions can be attributed to this first dimension. Stimuli with the highest positive coordinates in this dimension were I'll let you go now, Thank you, I want to be alone now, and Good-bye. All of the above stimuli represent abrupt and immediate forms of signalling inaccessibility. Negative coordinates were associated with Why don't you call me, Let's get together sometime, I'll get back to you, and See you soon. These stimuli suggest that although the conversation in the here-and-now may be finished, it can be reinitiated in the near future. Furthermore, stimuli at the negative end of this dimension invite further conversation in the here-and-now in which the two people negotiate their next encounter. In any case, Dimension 1 seems to support our first hypothesis, that the terminal marker can be used to signal varying degrees of accessibility.

Although Dimension 2 was not significantly related to the equal-unequal status and the acquainted-unacquainted scales, Table 2 does show that three of the bipolar scales associated with the status hypothesis, important-trivial (r = .81), strong-weak (r = .73), and formal-informal (r = .73); and three of the bipolar scales associated with the acquaintanceship hypothesis, typical of friends-typical of strangers (r = -.52),

typical of established relationships-typical of unaccustomed communicators (r = -.44), and unique-common (r = .48) were most highly correlated with Dimension 2. With the exception of the friends-strangers scale, nearly all of the variance in these scales accounted for by the three TORSCA dimensions can be attributed to Dimension 2. Dimension 2 is also correlated with three of the scales associated with the inaccessibility hypothesis, absolute-tentative (r = .61), expedient-slow (r = .50), immediate-delayed (r = .60). Stimuli with high positive coordinates along this dimension were Don't get into any trouble, Hang in there, Take care now, and Take it easy. All of the above stimuli could be described as more informal, slang modes of terminating a conversation, forms that would be typical in the closing segments of conversations among friends or peers. Stimuli with negative coordinates were I want to be alone now, I've got to go now, Good-bye, and Thank you. These stimuli would be more characteristic of communicators who are unaccustomed to each other or less familiar with each other. On the basis of the positioning of the stimulus coordinates and the correlations with the bipolar scales, we have somewhat arbitrarily labeled Dimension 2 our social distance dimension. This label was chosen because the terminals at one end seemed characteristic of interpersonally close communications involving friends, involving established relationships, and characterized by informality. Terminals at the other end seemed characteristic of more distant communications involving strangers, involving unaccustomed communicators, and characterized by more formality.

As noted earlier, three of the four scales associated with the inaccessibility hypothesis and highly correlated with Dimension 1 were also correlated with Dimension 2. This finding, and the fact that Dimensions 1 and 2 correlated -.72 suggest that conversational closings among high-social-distance individuals would tend to signal inaccessibility rather than further accessibility; a finding that makes intuitive sense. Apparently conversational closings used by low-social-distance friends are more likely to signal accessibility, either in the here-and-now or in the immediate future.

The four bipolar scales associated with the supportiveness hypothesis were most highly correlated with Dimension 3: strengthening to the relationship-hindering to the relationship ($r = -.53$), pleasant-unpleasant ($r = -.93$), likable-repugnant ($r = -.94$), and kind-cruel ($r = -.93$). With the possible exception of the strengthening-hindering scale, nearly all of the variance accounted for by the three TORSCA dimensions can be attributed to Dimension 3. Dimension 3 was also correlated with two of the scales associated with the inaccessibility hypothesis, expedient-slow ($r = .59$) and immediate-delayed ($r = .51$), and with one of the scales associated with the status hypothesis, strong-weak ($r = .46$). Stimuli with high positive coordinates were Thank you, Let's get together sometime, and Nice to see you. These stimuli would be more typical of encounters that were mutually (or singly) pleasing to the interactants. Furthermore, these stimuli seemed to be tacitly reaffirming the individual's commitment to an enduring relationship or expressing the individ-

ual's appreciation of the prior conversation. Negative coordinates were associated with I want to be alone now, I'll let you go no, Don't get into any trouble, and So long. These stimuli, typical of cold or lukewarm encounters, do not depict the supportiveness seen in the stimuli associated with the positive coordinates. Given the correlations in Table 2 and the stimulus coordinates along Dimension 3, we have decided to label this dimension our supportiveness dimension.

The non-orthogonality of Dimension 3 seems interesting. Stimuli that signal accessibility, such as Let's get together sometime, are generally perceived as being supportive of the relationship. One result is a correlation -.57 between Dimensions 1 and 3. Another result is that two of the scales associated with the inaccessibility hypothesis were correlated with Dimension 3, and three of the scales associated with the supportiveness hypothesis were correlated with Dimension 1. The pattern of these errant scales, the positioning of the stimuli, and the intercorrelation between Dimensions 1 and 3 suggest that the degree of signalling inaccessibility and the level of supportiveness depicted in the terminals are highly related. But there are two stimuli, Thanks and Thanks for stopping by, that were perceived by subjects as simultaneously signalling inaccessibility and support for the relationship. These two stimuli express appreciation for the prior communication but do not mention subsequent communication.

Since low-social-distance dyads have a greater relational commitment than high-social-distance dyads, i.e., friendship, intimacy, etc., we would expect that low-social-distance dyads would be more supportive of

each other. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that one of the scales associated with the status hypothesis, i.e., strong-weak, was correlated with Dimension 3.

Table 2 shows that the correlations between all of the TORSCA dimensions and the two scales that were explicit verbalizations of the status and acquaintanceship hypotheses, typical of equal-unequal status communicators and typical of acquainted-unacquainted communicators, failed to reach significance. At one point we conjectured that this was because we retained only three scaling dimensions. To ascertain whether this was indeed the case, multiple regressions were performed using the scale values from four- and five-dimensional solutions as predictor variables and the two bipolar scales, equal-unequal status and acquainted-unacquainted, as criterion variables. There was little gain in the multiple correlations and the resultant multiple correlations were also non-significant. Furthermore, none of the dimensions taken singly correlated significantly with either bipolar scale. These results led us to conclude that status differentials and mere acquaintanceship per se are not as salient to leave-taking as are the subjective qualities of the communicators' relationship, especially its formality and its established character.

Discussion

The observed dimensions are consistent with the theoretical positions of Goffman and Knapp et al. in the sense that the semantic meanings of conversational closings were perceived to vary in ways consonant with the two functions described by the authors: signalling inaccessibility

and supporting the relationship. Our social distance dimension is consistent with Goffman's notion of the "ritual license binding the two interactants."[11] If, for example, one were talking to a stranger, then certain verbal terminals would be more probable than others. Knapp et al. also hypothesized that "verbal and nonverbal termination behaviors vary according to the situational and relational constraints that bind two communicators."[12] Although the authors operationalize these constraints in terms of status and acquaintanceship, it may be more appropriate to conceive of them in terms of the social distance between the communicators. Lastly, the correlations between the dimensions suggest that signalling inaccessibility, signalling support for the relationship, and acknowledging social distance are all interrelated.

Besides the correspondence between our dimensions and the Goffman-Knapp et al. functions, there are other notable correspondences between our work and theirs. First, any terminal signals inaccessibility to further communication in the here-and-now, and, furthermore, inaccessibility is associated with a lack of support for the relationship. Knapp et al. suggest that one may escape this paradox by softening the directness of inaccessibility by reference to possible future encounters. Our study confirms this suggestion. Terminals referring to future encounters were seen as signalling both greater accessibility and support for the relationship.

Second, one of the terminals, I'll let you go now, is an example of what Knapp et al. call an internal legitimizer -- "any declarative statement that [seeks] to justify leave-taking by making reference to the sub-

ject's own sense of having completed the conversation."[13] Consistent with their assertion that internal legitimizers occur in more formal environments, this stimulus fell at the negative end of Dimension 2 with stimuli perceived as characteristic of high-social-distance dyads.

A third correspondence arises out of the positioning of the more informal forms of verbal terminals along the social distance dimension. Knapp et al. speculated that well-acquainted dyads should use more informal forms of farewells, i.e., slang. In this study, slang terms tended to fall on the low-social-distance pole of Dimension 2, confirming the position of Knapp et al.

An understanding of the perceived functions of leave-taking behaviors provides insight into the rule-governed nature of communication. As with other communicative stimuli, conversational terminals are cognitively arrayed according to their perceived functionality. Furthermore, the functions of communicative stimuli are associated with the communicator's intentions. These associations between the communicator's intentions and the perceived functionality of communicative stimuli make up the communication rules operative for that communicator. The present study has attempted to inductively arrive at the communication rules governing leave-taking behavior by determining how verbal terminals are cognitively arrayed. Consistent with other research, our results confirm that alternative leave-taking behaviors are arrayed in terms of three communicative functions: signalling inaccessibility, signalling support for the relationship, and acknowledging the social distance between communicators.

Although the present study provides some insight into the rule-governed nature of conversational closings, future research needs to focus on the intentionality of the communicator and the relationship between the perceived functionality of communicative stimuli and the communicator's intentions.

Notes

[1] E. Schegloff and H. Sacks, "Opening up Closings," Semiotica, 8 (1973), pp. 289-327.

[2] E. Goffman, Relations in Public (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); and M. Knapp, R. Hart, G. Friedrich, and G. Shulman, "The Rhetoric of Goodbye: Verbal and Nonverbal Correlates of Human Leave-taking," Speech Monographs, 40 (1973), pp. 182-198.

[3] Goffman, p. 62.

[4] Goffman, p. 83.

[5] Knapp et al., p. 186.

[6] Knapp et al., p. 193.

[7] Knapp et al., p. 193.

[8] See, for example, S. Rosenberg and K. Olshan, "Evaluative and Descriptive Aspects in Personality Perception," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 16 (1970), pp. 619-626; M. Friendly and S. Glucksberg, "On the Description of Subcultural Lexicons: A Multidimensional Approach," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 14 (1970), pp. 55-65; and D. Rummelhart and A. Abrahamson, "A Model for Analogical Reasoning," Cognitive Psychology, 5 (1973), pp. 1-28.

[9] See, for example, G. Barnett, K. Serota, and J. Taylor, "Campaign Communication and Attitude Change: A Multidimensional Analysis," Human Communication Research, 2 (1976), pp. 227-244; J. Saltiel and J. Woelfel, "Accumulated Information and Attitude Change," Human Communication Research,

1 (1975), pp. 333-344; and J. Gillham and J. Woelfel, "The Galileo System of Measurement," Human Communication Research, 3 (1977), pp. 222-234.

[10] F. Young and W. Jorgerson, "TORSCA: A FORTRAN IV Program for Shepard-Kruskal Multidimensional Scaling Analysis," Behavioral Science, 12 (1967), p. 498.

[11] Goffman, p. 83.

[12] Knapp et al., p. 186.

[13] Knapp et al., p. 188.

Table 1

Scale Values of the TORSCA Dimensions

Stimuli	Dim 1	Dim 2	Dim 3
Good-bye	.412	-.208	-.264
Take it easy	-.214	.337	.224
Catch you later	-.302	.208	-.097
See you soon	-.370	.137	.115
Talk to you later	-.248	.083	-.048
So long	.029	.190	-.236
Have a nice day	.110	.101	.349
Well, have a good day	.045	.133	.305
I've got to go now	.360	-.213	-.595
Don't get into any trouble	-.346	.713	.234
It was nice talking to you	-.010	-.184	.303
Take care now	-.145	.204	.345
I want to be alone now	.900	-.521	-1.154
Thank you	.632	-.717	.196
I'll let you go now	.437	.177	-.382
I'll get back to you	-.253	-.076	-.216
Hang in there	-.306	.419	.273
Let's get together sometime	-.317	-.243	.183
Thanks for stopping by	.174	-.437	.285
Why don't you call me sometime	-.571	.101	.182

Table 2

Correlations between Hypothesized Functions and TORSCA Dimensions

Function	Multiple R	Dim 1 r	Dim 2 r	Dim 3 r
Inaccessibility				
Desire-No Desire for Future Communication	.81***	.66**	-.12	-.26
Absolute-Tentative	.87***	-.86***	.61**	.43
Expedient-Slow	.89***	-.89***	.50*	.59**
Immediate-Delayed	.91***	-.91***	.60**	.51*
Support for Relationship				
Strengthening-Hindering to the Relationship	.72***	.41	.11	-.53
Kind-Cruel	.94***	.48*	-.16	-.93***
Pleasant-Unpleasant	.93***	.52*	-.21	-.93***
Likable-Repugnant	.95***	.52*	-.15	-.94***
Acknowledgment of Status				
Equal-Unequal Status	.37	.29	-.26	.01
Important-Trivial	.82***	-.45*	.81***	.16
Strong-Weak	.75**	-.65**	.73***	.46*
Formal-Informal	.77***	-.63**	.73***	.19

Table 2 (continued)

Function	Multiple R	Dim 1 r	Dim 2 r	Dim 3 r
Acknowledgment of Acquaintanceship				
Acquainted-Unacquainted	.52	.18	-.39	.19
Friends-Strangers	.80***	.36	-.52*	.11
Established Relationships-Unaccustomed Communicators	.56	.21	-.44*	.17
Unique-Common	.50	-.11	.48	.19

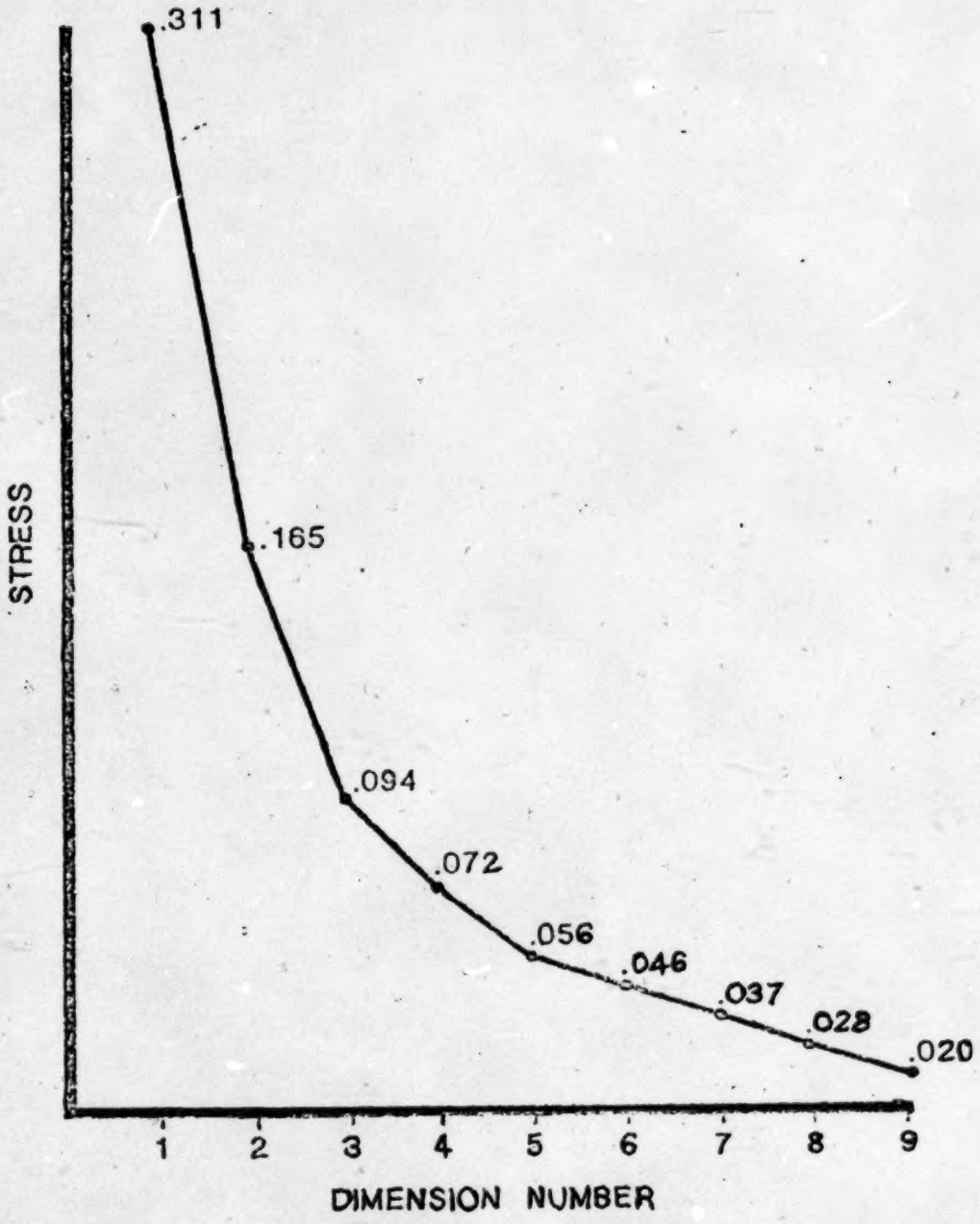
* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Stress as a Function of the Number of Dimensions.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